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Engaging fathers with family support services: using conversation analysis

Introduction

Working with fathers represents a classic tension in social work practice. On the one hand, social work is predicated on the basis that parents, including fathers, have the capacity for growth and to improve their own and their children's lives. On the other hand, social workers are required to identify when a parent presents a risk to the child and should no longer be caring for them. Given that most social work continues to be with mothers, fathers represent a practical dilemma for social workers in terms of their presence or absence in a child's life, the quality of that involvement, and the potential for them to be positively engaged with change. Although it is now well established that practitioners should 'engage' fathers with child welfare services, their continued invisibility to services represents a challenge to researchers interested in improving the situation. This chapter considers how conversation analysis can be used to understand professional practice as it happens and the circumstances in which fathers are made more or less visible in the interaction.

Fathers and family support

Social work has historically had an uneasy relationship with fathers. Tasked with safeguarding the welfare of children, social workers have to make decisions about the capacity of the adults in the house to meet the child's needs. When parents have separated, and because children are more likely to live with their mother, this frequently involves assessing the capacity of, and the risks presented by other men in the child's life, such as step-fathers and mothers' new partners. The risks of not doing so can lead to tragic consequences and the history of social work is marked by a series of high profile child deaths such as Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford and Peter Connelly, all of whom were killed by new male partners in their mothers' lives. The importance of identifying and understanding the presence of men in the lives of

children has continued to resonate in reviews of other child deaths since then (Brandon et al., 2009).

Gathering information about the men in a child's life is therefore important when conducting statutory investigations of risks to children. Even when there is no immediate threat to a child's life, harsh parenting behaviour exacted by fathers has negative consequences for children in their future relationships with peers (Allen et al., 2002) or displaying problematic behaviour (Lamb and Lewis, 2010). Conversely, when fathers have withdrawn from family life through paternal depression, this has also been correlated with externalising behaviours in children (Cummings et al., 2008). Given that social workers come into contact with families when there are concerns about the child's welfare, the involvement of the father in the child's life may be characterised by workers as absent, of no use, irrelevant, or harmful (Scourfield, 2003).

However, this bleak picture is set against four decades of research that demonstrates the benefits to children's development brought about when fathers are positively involved (Lamb, 1976, 2010), outcomes that include a higher cognitive ability (Sarkadi et al., 2008), better mental health (Welsh et al., 2004) and reduced likelihood of being in trouble with the police (Flouri and Buchanan, 2002). Pleck (2010) characterised positive paternal involvement as caring directly for children, playing with them, responding warmly to them, providing emotional support, and setting limits (and consequences) for their behaviour. When there are concerns about a father's capacity to care for his child, working with him to make improvements in each of these areas therefore offers a practical means of improving his contribution to the child's life.

This work is often conducted by family support services where practitioners work directly with parents to improve their family relationships and parenting skills, as well as monitoring information about the family that is assessed in terms of risk (Quinton, 2004). For both reasons, it is important to understand the position of fathers in family support services so that he can be supported to make a positive

contribution to his child's life and any risks that he may present become known and shared with child protection workers.

Despite this, child welfare services have long been recognised as failing to engage effectively with fathers both in family support services (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004, Featherstone, 2003) and in child protection services (Farmer and Owen, 1998, Baynes and Holland, 2012). An illustration of this is the number of fathers who attend parenting programmes which has remained consistently low over the last three decades. In 1982, a study of parenting programmes by Budd and O'Brien found that fathers represented less than 15 per cent of participants on parenting programmes (cited in Bagnier and Eyberg, 2003) and in a large scale evaluation of parenting programmes for parents of 8-13 year olds, Lindsay et al. (2008) found that fathers represented just 12% of participants. In a subsequent evaluation of a large scale national trial of parenting programmes, the same team found that only 9% of the 2956 participants were fathers, despite there being a particular effort to recruit them (Lindsay et al., 2014). As a result, significant numbers of men are not engaging with parenting services and opportunities to promote the wellbeing of their children are being missed.

Explanations for the non-involvement of fathers in family support services cluster around three positions, in which the key agents are the fathers, the mothers, or services. Each of these appeals to the notion of gender as an organising principle, such as that there are intrinsic properties of men and women that govern their approach to parenting and services, or that the attitudes that practitioners hold towards gender informs the development and delivery of services. Each position will briefly be considered below.

The first position holds men responsible. Addis and Mahalik (2003) argued that men are less likely to seek help for problems they are facing because it is viewed as a sign of weakness and therefore a threat to their self-concept of masculinity. As parenting and childcare are still commonly viewed as predominantly female tasks, a willingness to seek help in this area may compound the perceived threat to a masculine identity.

Further to simply not seeking help, some fathers are argued to actively avoid services. Fathers interviewed by Bayley et al. (2009) embodied this threatened self-identity by speaking of their fears of being 'dictated to' by staff and a similar concern was raised by fathers interviewed by Butt (2009) who avoided parenting programmes because they thought they would be 'told what to do' by staff. As a consequence, this position has fathers taking active measures to remain 'invisible' to services and withdraw from contact with workers.

A second position explains the lack of fathers' involvement with services by locating responsibility in the actions of the mother. By concealing information about the father (or male partner) from the practitioner, it is argued that she acts as a 'gatekeeper' to practitioners' access to information about the father (or other men involved in the child's life). This is illustrated in the findings of some studies of family support services where some mothers who participated felt that parenting (and therefore parenting services) were their 'territory' (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004) and that some of the support mothers derived from children's centres came from it being a female space (Ghate et al., 2000). Other studies have argued that mothers might conceal the identity of a male partner because they were in unauthorised receipt of state benefits or because the knowledge of a partner's violence might result in the children being taken into care (Dominelli et al., 2010). The notion of the 'maternal gatekeeper' is drawn from psychological and sociological studies of the family (see Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Walker and McGraw, 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2008) that has identified maternal gatekeeping behaviours such as when mothers moderate the father's access to opportunities for childcare, play or responsibilities. However, this term has been adopted in the professional literature which positions the mother as the 'gatekeeper to the family' (Glynn and Dale, 2015) through whom the practitioner has to negotiate access to other members of the family. The adoption of this position in social work is problematic, given that it locates the problem with the mother who becomes the focus of intervention and is then held responsible for the safety of the family, even when it may be the violence of the father that is creating the risk (Farmer and Owen, 1998; Featherstone and Trinder, 2007).

A third position holds that practitioners fail to engage fathers through their own embodied and interactional practices. Ghate et al. (2000) found that the absence of fathers in publicity materials in a children's centre and the lack of male staff there produced a 'feminised' environment in which fathers did not feel welcome. When practitioners worked directly with families, they have been found to make the mother the focus of the work and involve the father less often, sometimes for reasons of perceived absence in the family, or for the perceived threat they represented (Ferguson and Hogan, 2004).

The three positions considered here each focus separately on fathers, mothers and practitioners and have identified numerous factors associated with the lack of fathers engaged by family support services. It is commonly recognised that these three components do not exist in isolation, and interact with each other, but it is much rarer to collect data of those interactions to examine how these encounters gets negotiated in practice. One reason for this is that most evidence on the topic is based on self-reported data in which participants have a stake in the research process and produce a representation of practice that reflects, in part, their identity, for example as a professional practitioner. Roulston (2014) has illustrated how this occurs in her analysis of key events taken from qualitative research interviews. The complexity of interactional events during practice encounters also makes it impossible for anyone to recall the exact sequences and details of what was said and what difference it made to the outcome (Silverman, 2011).

If we are going to understand a practice phenomenon such as engaging fathers, having access to direct recordings of practice enables researchers to analyse whether and how different theories about engaging fathers are apparent in any particular encounter. Such an empirically derived standpoint requires an approach to analysing recorded data in a methodologically robust manner and having been developed over recent decades, conversation analysis offers a means of achieving this at the intersection of linguistics and sociology as discussed below.

Using conversation analysis

Researchers using conversation analysis collect data by making recordings of interactions as they are already occurring in their natural environment and without them being provoked by the researcher (ten Have, 2007). Detailed transcriptions are then made which are analysed for evidence of how participants navigate their way through sequences of interaction to achieve particular outcomes.

Conversation analysis starts from the principle that speakers use talk to achieve social action. It draws on the work of speech act theorists who had investigated how people 'do things with words' such as marking the moment of marriage with 'I pronounce you man and wife' (Austin, 1962) or by formulating different ways to make a complaint (Searle, 1969). Where speech act theorists used 'ideal' examples of utterances because of the perceived 'messiness' of actual interaction, one of the insights of conversation analysts is that speakers coordinate their talk in very fine detail to achieve an orderly progression of talk (Sacks, 1984). It has also been used to show how our intuitive, or theory-driven understandings of talk may be mistaken. For example, influential studies of interaction in the 1970s found that men were more likely than women to interrupt others in conversation and this was treated as evidence of the reproduction of patriarchal power in ordinary settings (discussed in Speer and Stokoe, 2011). Subsequent analysis by Schegloff (1993) showed that examples of interruptions identified by the original research were not treated as such by the participants of those conversations. When this more endogenous analysis was taken into account in further recordings of the original dataset, the differences based on gender fell away. The importance of identifying phenomena that can be shown to be relevant to the participants themselves is therefore an important consideration in conversation analytic work.

Treating interaction as a resource through which to pursue action has enabled conversation analysts to examine how people retain anonymity during calls to a suicide helpline (Sacks, 1967), how people manage compliments (Pomerantz, 1984),

and how politicians elicit applause during political speeches (Atkinson, 1984). The approach has also been applied to professional practice such as handling calls to emergency services (Whalen et al., 1988); exploring patient's concerns in medical settings (Heritage et al., 2007) and recruiting neighbours in conflict to mediation services (Stokoe, 2013). In the context of the current chapter, it also affords the possibility of enhancing our understanding of how fathers might 'avoid' contact with, or how practitioners might 'recruit' them to a family support service. As well as the linguistic content of interaction, conversation analysts recognise that people deploy resources such as intonation, silence and other paralinguistic features to achieve actions and these features are carefully incorporated into transcriptions following a system developed by Jefferson (2004).

Once the transcripts have been prepared, and in conjunction with repeated listening to the recordings, features of interest are identified and subjected to further analysis that interrogates the action that is being pursued, the sequential position in which it has been produced and how it is treated in the next turn. In the current study, the focus was on occasions when fathers were spoken about with a view to identifying utterances that contributed to their involvement with the service. Having identified instances of talk that were relevant to the ongoing involvement of the father, comparisons were made with those in other calls across the dataset for evidence of regularities in interactions and outcomes. In this way, conversation analysis offers a way to make empirically justified investigations into the links between specific interactional practices and outcomes in applied fields such as the recruitment of fathers to child welfare services.

The study

The findings presented here are drawn from a doctoral study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and set in three local authorities (Symonds, 2015). In the previous decade, the UK government had been concerned to provide more support to families and to address the perceived rise in anti-social behaviour

amongst young people by delivering structured parenting programmes (Home Office, 2006). Parenting programmes are usually designed to support parents' competencies in building relationships managing the behaviour of their children and are commonly delivered in weekly sessions of group discussion, filmed examples and tasks to practise at home (Webster-Stratton, 2005).

Three family support services took part in the study, selected because they offered, and received referrals for, group based parenting programmes. Although each service differed in how they delivered their service (one service encouraged parents to go to an information session before deciding whether to do a group based programme), the standard practice on receipt of a referral was that practitioners would phone the referred parent to introduce the service and make arrangements for the service. Recordings were made of all those initial telephone conversations to provide the basis for comparisons across the calls during analysis.

Six practitioners made audio recordings of their initial conversations with parents. All practitioners were female and had between four and 19 years experience in the field. One was a qualified social worker. Although practitioners had already had time to consider their consent to take part in the study, parents were already being recorded before they were aware of the study. In order to manage this sensitivity, practitioners informed parents about the study shortly after they had introduced themselves and asked them if they would consent to the recording continuing (if the parent did not consent, the practitioner stopped the recording and the recording was deleted). Because the parent had not had time to consider their consent at the beginning of the call, practitioners were required to check consent again at the end of the call after the parent was aware what the content of the conversation had been.

Recordings were attempted with 51 parents. In only four instances did parents decline to be recorded, but another 16 recordings had to be discounted for reasons such as failure to fully insert the lead into the microphone socket of the recorder, forgetting to ask for consent, or not being able to confirm consent again at the end

of the call. Of the 31 recordings available for analysis, three were excluded because the call did not proceed to an arrangement for other reasons (such as the parent already doing a parenting programme). This resulted in a dataset of 28 recordings in which the conversation proceeded to making an arrangement for the service. In 25 calls, the main parent spoken to was the mother, from which five fathers were recruited. In the three other calls, the main parent spoken to was the father from which one mother was recruited.

The focus of the analysis was to identify how fathers were talked about in these calls. However, it soon became apparent that not all relevant males were fathers and there were references in the calls to the mother's partner, the child's grandfather as well as to birth fathers. This range of 'social' types of fatherhood is well recognised and supports Collier and Sheldon's (2008) contention that fatherhood is 'fragmenting'. Although it was safe to assume that the referred parent had a direct relationship with the child and was resident at home, the status of the other parent was not often clear. References to 'father' were entirely absent from the data and other terms were used, such as 'dad', 'step-dad', 'husband', 'hubby', 'partner', 'wife' sometimes implied, but did not always establish their relationship to the child or their status in the home. Because these people were not present in the conversation, it became an interactional problem which was rarely resolved. There was evidence in some calls that the practitioner already had knowledge of the name of the fathers, but would wait for mothers to introduce his name into the conversation. Although they sometimes referred to him by his relationship in the family, such as 'his dad', or 'my husband', they did not name him and this absence of his name became a problem when the practitioner sought to include him in the service. The pattern was the same when it came to mother's details in the calls to fathers and this contrasting data was used to investigate whether the differences in outcome could be associated with gender or with the presence or absence of the other parent in the conversation. The analysis focused on the ways that practitioners and referred parents spoke about other carers in ways that were associated with an agreement by the end of the call that the other carer would be included in future arrangements. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider extracts of data that

illustrate three moments that occurred in calls where there were opportunities for practitioners to negotiate the involvement of fathers in family support services.

Fathers 'slipping away'

The first opportunity for practitioners to be aware of is the possibility that the father will answer the phone. At that moment, he is not aware that it is a practitioner from a family support service and, in two examples from the data, found a reason to avoid speaking and passed the practitioner to his wife. In the extracts below, 'Par' denotes the parent and 'Wor' denotes the worker. All names have been anonymised with fictional alternatives.

Extract 1

Yvonne and Mick

01 [ring]
02 Par: Ha:llo?
03 (0.3)
04 Wor: Hello is ↑that ↑Mick?
05 (2.0)
06 Par: Y-yeah it's Mick yeah.
07 Wor: °Hello° Mick, uh my name's Yvonne, I'm
08 ringing from: (name of service), .hh um, I've
09 had a referral for you:, .hh from (name of
10 service)? Samantha ↑Beattie?
11 (0.6)
12 Wor: Um: mt (0.3) suggesting that you, might,
13 (0.3) like some help around parenting.
14 (1.3)
15 Par: .Hhhh ah right, i- gu- I'd d right ah hhh.
16 Wor: HHo(hh) .
17 Par: =So =oh yeah, yu- you got me confu(h)sed now

18 [so I]
 19 Wor: [Sorry,]
 20 Par: I go' t it's, no it's so much going on >it's
 21 alright u[m,<]
 22 Wor: [↑Oh]h:, o[kay.]
 23 Par: [U h,] mk c: i:h, .hh (0.5) the best
 24 way for me to deal with thi:s,
 25 Wor: [°°Yeah°°]
 26 Par: [I f] I give you to my wife, cos I don't
 27 wanna (0.3) um (.) mess it up if you see what
 28 I me[an]?
 29 Wor: [Th]at's absolutely ↑fi:ne, yes: no
 30 pro[blem at all.]
 31 Par: [O h o]kay,
 32 (0.3)
 33 Wor: Lo[vely.]
 34 Par: [U(hh)] a(h)'r(h)'t.
 35 (0.4)
 36 Wor: Thank [you.]
 37 Par: [Ta.]
 38 (6.1)
 39 Par2: Hello?

One of the advantages of having the recording of the actual encounter is that the analysis can reveal how things develop from the very beginning of an interaction. After Mick has answered the call in line 2, Yvonne greets him, but as she uses his name in line 4, she also reveals herself to have prior knowledge about him (presumably from the referral information). There follows a relatively long gap of two seconds which indicates Mick might have some trouble with how to respond and this is evident when he confirms his identity in line 6 by his repeated 'y' sound. Nevertheless, Yvonne continues to introduce herself and explain her warrant for the call, that she has received a referral. Stivers and Rossano (2010) have shown how a rising intonation at the end of a speaker's turn can be used to pursue a response

from the next speaker and Yvonne ends her turn there, providing a slot for Mick to show his recognition of the referral and therefore endorse Yvonne's call. Instead, though, he does not respond and 0.6 seconds passes before Yvonne treats her current explanation as not adequate enough for Mick to have recognised the situation. With some evidence of her own sense of delicacy about the emerging difficulties in the interaction (Yvonne hesitates at the start of line 12 and pauses mid-turn), she names the explicit reason for the referral which is that Mick 'might like some help around parenting' (lines 12-13).

Up until this point, Mick has made minimal contributions to the conversation but although they have been marked with some caution, they have been coherent in their production. Once the topic of parenting support is mentioned, he allows another 1.3 seconds to elapse before embarking on a long troubled turn that is characterised by a marked shift in understanding ('ah right' in line 14), false starts, an appeal to being 'confused' (line 17) and an account of there being 'so much going on' (line 20). Eventually, Mick suggests that the 'best way' (lines 23-24) to proceed is for him to hand Yvonne to his wife so that he doesn't 'mess it up' (line 27). Having extracted himself from the conversation, his wife, Tracey, picks up the receiver and Yvonne continues the call with her.

What is of note in this extract is that Yvonne makes no mention of Mick's wife, either by name or by designation, until he refers to her in line 26. His account for doing so directly contrasts his own capacity to 'mess it up' (the 'it' referring to a conversation about parenting support) with that of his wife who is to be understood as more competent in this matter. He achieves this by invoking gender as the grounds for avoiding the conversation (his wife is competent in matters of parenting, but he may mess it up) and provides evidence of how a father might avoid a service at the first available opportunity. Appealing to gender based notions of competency in parenting is also deployed by the father in the second extract which follows a similar pattern.

Extract 2

Kelly and Tim

01 (ring)
02 Ans: Hello. Your call cannot be taken at the
03 moment, so please leave your message, after
04 the tone. ((bee:p)).
05 (0.4)
06 Wor: Mt .hhhhh hi, um, my name's Kelly Teater and
07 I work with Gladys Smith at (name of
08 service). You've been referred for some
09 parenting support so:,
10 Par: =Hello,
11 (0.4)
12 Wor: ↑Oh he↑llo:!
13 Par: Hello:, hhh.
14 Wor: [Y-]
15 Par: [The] answering 'chine g'n (.) before I got
16 to the phone.
17 Wor: ↑Oh::h, okay um, who am I talking to?
18 Par: Mister Lumbard
19 (0.4)
20 Wor: Megan?
21 (0.3)
22 Par: No:, Tim=
23 Wor: =Tim, oh I apologi:se, Mister Lumbard. Tk
24 calling you Megan, .hhhh Hi.
25 Par: H[ello,]
26 Wor: [U m ,]
27 (0.5)
28 Wor: Yeah, as I said, >my name's< Kelly and um,
29 you've been working with Gladys:. .Hhhhh,
30 (0.8)
31 Wor: Yeah?
32 Par: I'll pass you to my wife cos she probably

33 know more.
34 Wor: =She knows exactly what I'm talking about
35 [does] she?
36 Par: [Yes,]
37 Wor: Brilliant. Okay, thanks Tim,
38 (2.9)
39 Par2: Hello?

In this call, Tim has picked up the phone part way through Kelly leaving a message on the answer machine just at the point at which she mentioned the referral for parenting support. After some confusion about establishing his identity, Kelly returns to the purpose of the call in line 28 by introducing herself in relation to 'Gladys' whom she introduces as somebody who has been working with Tim. On the completion of Gladys' name, Kelly takes a breath and pauses, leaving time for Tim to mark his recognition of Gladys' name and therefore the implication that he is a relevant person who has been involved in the work. However, much as with Mick in the first extract, Tim withholds any sign of recognition and after 0.8 seconds have elapsed, Kelly pursues his recognition more directly with 'Yeah?' in line 31. Even at this point, Tim ignores the opportunity to mark his knowledge of Gladys and instead declares that he will hand Kelly on to his 'wife' 'cos she probably knows more' (lines 32-33). This has direct parallels with Mick's reason in extract 1 and appeals to a gendered notion of his wife being more knowledgeable (and therefore more capable) in this matter. Tim is also successful in extricating himself from the call and his wife, Mary, takes the rest of the call.

In both extracts, men displayed interactional strategies to avoid being any more involved in the service interaction. They appealed to categorical associations of gender in passing the practitioner on to their wives who were associated with greater knowledge and ability in relation to the call. To this extent, their avoidance of the service was successful. Although these might both be characterised as fathers avoiding services, they had answered the phone and identified themselves. This

information provided resources that practitioners were able to return to use later in the call, and which will be returned to in more detail.

Mothers gatekeeping fathers' involvement

The next two examples are taken from later sequences in the calls when the practitioner had enquired about the other carer being involved in the service. In these extracts, the parent acknowledges the presence of another carer, but responds by giving a reason why the other carer might not be able to be involved in the service. There are no examples from the conversation analytic literature of how gatekeeping behaviour gets achieved based on recordings of actual situations, but the following offer a glimpse into gatekeeping situations that practitioners and parents might find themselves in.

Extract 3 - MP

Mel and Poppy

- 01 Wor: Ok 'n if you've got a partner uhm (0.3)
02 they're they're welcome to come along as
03 we:ll
04 (0.3)
05 Par: Ooh at'd be good as well yeah lovel- I know
06 he w- 'e's a train driver so he does some
07 awkward shifts but yeah I'm definitely
08 interested in .hhh in doing some more
09 cours:s: see if I can .hhh >I don't know make
10 myself< a better parent 'oo knows
11 (0.3)
12 Par: [Hhhh]
13 Wor: [Yeah] totally

In this call, the practitioner (Mel) has made an offer for Poppy's 'partner' to 'come along' (line 2) to the programme. The way this offer is designed proposes a low degree of certainty on the likely acceptance of the offer, the conditional 'if' makes the offer contingent on whether Poppy has got a partner (which Mel has not yet established). Second, if this condition is met, then the offer is one of the partner being 'welcome' (but not a requirement) and Poppy is positioned as somebody who is entitled to speak on his behalf. When Poppy starts to respond in line 5, she does so with a mark of surprise, 'Ooh' and an appreciation 'at'd be good'. However, she then goes on to calibrate this by introducing a reason why her partner might not be able to do the programme because he is a train driver and does 'awkward shifts' (line 7). By prioritising her partner's work over his involvement in a parenting programme, Poppy deploys categorical associations of gender to support her position that he might not be able to attend. Having downplayed his possible involvement, though, Poppy apparently realises that this less enthusiastic presentation might reflect on her own commitment to the service and she makes the point that she remains committed to making herself a 'better parent' (line 10). Whether intentionally or not, Poppy has not revealed any other information about her partner or suggested that Mel could speak to him directly, maintaining her position as the point of contact for the service. She has already established a reason for his potential non-involvement with the service and presented herself as a responsible and willing participant. This is treated as unremarkable by Mel and the possibility of his involvement is left unresolved. The call ended with no further exploration of the topic and the practitioner having no contact details or arrangements to follow up the matter of the father being involved in the service. These actions are consistent with findings in studies of maternal gatekeeping with the mother being the point of access to the family and moderating the involvement of the father. However, this interactional sequence was also evident in a call to one of the fathers, during which the practitioner used the same approach to involve his partner in the parenting programme with a similar lack of success.

Extract 4 – MR

Mel and Raf

01 Wor: Alri:ght, yeah an' it's the taste:r (.) next
 02 wednesday >and we'll book you a place on
 03 that< and you're welcome to bring your
 04 partner alo:ng bu' uh:m: you might have
 05 childcare [pr(h)oblems.]
 06 Par: [No well] she won't be able to
 07 cos she'll have the young
 08 'un:[s won't she:.]
 09 Wor: [Sh:e'll have the young 'un]s. Yeah yeah,

In this call, the offer is made in the same format as the previous extract, by extending a 'welcome' to a partner. The decision is also made contingent on the parent on the phone rather than making it an expectation of the service. In fact, Mel pre-empts a reason for the partner not being able to attend because of childcare problems (earlier in the call, she had referred to the father as having 'quite a big family'). Raf begins his turn before Mel has finished to confirm both that his partner won't be attending and that this will be because of childcare. The use of the tag question 'won't she' in line 8 marks the issue of childcare as a barrier that Mel should already have known would prevent her from attending and therefore that the suggestion was inapposite. Much as was the case with Poppy in the earlier extract, the referred parent did not disclose any other details about the partner and treated himself as entitled to manage her availability without consultation with herself or suggesting any subsequent contact between her and the practitioner. The similarities with Poppy suggest that the interactions of both Poppy and Raf result in a phenomenon which might be described as gatekeeping. However, the evidence in these two extracts challenges the notion that gatekeeping access to the family is a gendered phenomenon, associated only with mothers. It was apparent in the call to Raf as well with a very similar interactional structure. This is not to say that gender was irrelevant to these sequences. Poppy and Raf both drew on gendered categories of activity to support their claims of unavailability. In Poppy's case, her partner's employment was treated by both speakers as reasonable grounds for his absence,

reproducing the trope of the man as provider to the family. In contrast, Raf drew on the notion of the mother's responsibilities for childcare as justification for her non-involvement in the parenting programme. Within a conversation analytic framework, gender is treated as a resource which participants use to pursue and achieve certain actions rather than a topic through which to explain phenomena such as gatekeeping. An alternative explanation for the gatekeeping in these extracts is that it is an interactional accomplishment achieved by the combined actions of both the practitioner and referred parent. It is the absence of the other parent from the conversation that is more consistent than their gender.

As was described earlier in the chapter, the issue of gatekeeping has been critiqued in relation to the social work because it locates responsibility for action with the gatekeeper and the consequences for mothers has been that they have been held accountable for risks for which they are not responsible. To hold Poppy and Raf responsible for not facilitating access to their partners ignores the responsibilities of practitioners for how they might manage the interaction in ways that promote the involvement of other carers in more positive ways. Examples of how this was achieved in the final two extracts below.

Recruiting other carers

When it came to securing agreement that the other carer should be involved in the service, practitioners were successful in just six of the 28 calls. When practitioners successfully secured agreement about the involvement of the other parent, there were three features that appeared in systematic ways across the data. First, practitioners had said the name of the other carer earlier in the conversation. Second, they had established that the other carer had an ongoing relationship in the family (either with the referred parent as a spouse or partner, or with the child). If these two were established, the opportunity arose for the practitioner to ask about their involvement in the service by including their name in the question and

designing the question to prefer a 'yes' response (see Raymond, 2003 on the design of these questions). This format is illustrated in the following two extracts:

Extract 5

Briony and Kate

01 Wor: Would your (.) partner Paul like t' >come
02 along< >to it< as we:ll?
03 Par: U:hm (0.7) yeah yeah,
04 Wor: =(Sh'll I?)
05 (0.2)
06 ? .Hh
07 Par: Yeah.

Earlier in this call, Kate had already expressed reluctance about the service and the speakers had also established that her partner, Paul, had been omitted from the referral. Nevertheless, Briony's question in line 1 makes specific reference to Kate's relationship with Paul as well as his name and anticipates that she is likely to accept. Despite some initial hesitancy on Kate's part, she agrees this in line 3 and goes on to confirm it when Briony seeks to clarify this commitment afterwards.

Knowledge of the other carer was obtained in different ways in the calls, but one was when they had picked up the phone and slipped away, as with Mick and Tim in Extracts 1 and 2. By establishing their name and presence in the family, practitioners were able to use these resources later in the call when trying to recruit them. The following extract comes from the call where Tim had passed the practitioner to his 'wife' because she would 'know more'. By establishing these details, however, the practitioner was able to draw on them when attempting to recruit him to the service later in the call.

Extract 8

Kelly and Tim

01 Wor: Lovely okay s:o .hhh and will Tim be there
02 as well?
03 (0.2)
04 Par: yes::.

When these details about fathers (and other carers) were established and the question was designed in this way, practitioners were successful in securing agreement that they would be involved in the service. Conversely, when these details were not established before asking about their involvement, practitioners were much less successful in involving fathers. The fact that this pattern was consistent across the whole dataset suggests that there are some practitioner actions that can be effective whether they are speaking to both mothers and fathers.

Using conversation analysis to research fathers

The instances examined in this chapter reveal some of the practical difficulties that practitioners have to manage when recruiting fathers to family support services. When a father is evidently avoiding a service, practitioners face dilemmas as to whether they should pursue him or let him pass the telephone to his wife on the grounds that she would know more than him about parenting support. Similarly, when practitioners are faced with situations where parents present their partner as being unavailable to the service, what resources are available to address these potential barriers in the moment of their production? These dilemmas represent problems in engaging fathers that have long been recognised by scholars across the social sciences. The contribution that conversation analysis can make to this field is to understand how participants address the practical management of these problems based on an empirical analysis of data from what actually happened in the encounter. Some examples of how this is done have been included in this chapter.

Schegloff (1997) argued that conversation analysts should derive findings based on categories that the participants themselves are demonstrably oriented towards rather than those derived by the analyst. This has been described as 'methodological severity' by Hammersley (2008), but means that the insights from participants' own use of categories can be used to evaluate categories such as 'engaging fathers' or 'maternal gatekeeping' for utility. Conversation analysis is necessarily detailed in its procedures, but offers a route by which these explanations of professional encounters can be considered alongside a methodologically robust account of the actual interactions as they were produced in the moment. Although the instances in this chapter represent a tiny proportion of all the interactions that occur across family support services, it opens the prospect of building further collections of recordings to develop and refine existing explanatory categories. One example that has been considered in this chapter is the status of a partner's 'awkward shifts'. The analyst can never fully 'know' whether this is the case or not and whether those shifts will prove an insurmountable barrier to his involvement with the service. What can be shown, though, is that his shifts became a relevant topic at the moment the mother was convincing the practitioner of his unavailability. By basing data on the recordings of actual encounters and analysing each utterance in the sequential context of its environment, conversation analysis offers a means by which the relationships between people can be empirically investigated, what Heritage (1984) has described as 'the architecture of subjectivity'. For researchers of fatherhood and of the services that work with them, this offers interesting topics of inquiry for how best to work with fathers and improve the welfare of their children as a result.

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